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National Defense U.: Ferment at Top

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 2 — The National Defense University, the nation's top military school, is in ferment as it seeks to illuminate critical issues for the makers of military policy as well as to educate the generals and admirals of tomorrow.

In the last two years the university has organized three new centers to produce what the university's president, Lieut. Gen. Richard D. Lawrence, an Army officer, calls "cogent research on critical issues for the national security establishment."

Those additions, plus other fresh efforts in research, have been made in response to needs expressed by the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff for long-range thinking on military and political issues away from the crises of the Pentagon.

Primary Training Mission

Other military schools around the country mainly educate officers to be commanders in their own services. But the National Defense University's primary mission is to prepare the best and the brightest middle-ranking officers for senior leadership in the armed forces, especially to work in political-military affairs and to serve on joint staffs in unified, four-service commands. Beyond military strategy, the students are given a heavy dose of domestic and international politics, economics, the way decisions on national security are made in Washington, and courses on leadership, ethics, and technology.

The university also educates some civilian officials from the State and Defense Departments, Central Intelligence Agency, and other government departments.

The new research centers focus on analyses of strategic issues, wartime mobilization and war gaming. Another university research unit produces books and monographs. Moreover, the university is now putting special emphasis on useful, rather than academic, research by student officers, each of whom has had nearly 20 years of military experience, and is putting more emphasis on computer concepts.

Heavy Workload for Students

Situated at Fort McNair on a point jutting into the confluence of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers, the university consists of the National War College and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. It offers a heavy workload that surprises many students.

Col. John Marshall, an Air Force officer, said he looked forward to "peace and quiet" at the university after nearly 20 years as a fighter pilot. He tried to read everything at first, he added, but soon discovered, "I had to sort it out."

Most of the 300 students arrive as lieutenant colonels or Navy commanders and are promoted to colonel or captain before they graduate. Each is a potential general or admiral, though few achieve those ranks.

Students entering the university take a battery of psychological tests to help them measure and then improve executive skills. They are screened for physical fitness. "We want to broaden their minds and tighten their middles," says the university's vice president, L. Bruce Laingen of the State Department, who brings a diplomatic point of view to the university.

At the beginning of the school year, officers in both colleges are given an overview of the national security apparatus. Then war college students study strategy, the art of war, combined operations, and international relations while students at the industrial college work on problems of manpower, weapons acquisition and industrial resources.

At the end of the year, the students join forces again in seminars to run a long wartime exercise known as Prudent Stride, in which each group develops a strategy, acquires forces, manages a crisis, deploys forces, and sends its Blue Team out to war against the Red Team.

In their studies, the students, who already are experienced in leading small units, are taught to lead large and complex organizations. Maj. Gen. Perry M. Smith, an Air Force officer who is commandant of the National War College, says he disagrees with critics who contend that senior officers have become too managerial at the expense of leadership.

"The guy who runs a large organization has got to be both a good leader and a good manager," he argues. "When you have to ask people to go die, that takes more leadership than management."

Maj. Gen. Clyde D. Dean, a marine who is commandant of the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, teaches officers to manage the resources of defense. He says officers are taught: "We manage things but we lead people."

In the new research effort, the director of strategic studies, John Despres, a civilian analyst who has worked at the C.I.A. and the Pentagon, says, "Our objective is to come up with some ideas that are illuminating for senior policy makers."

Analysts have produced refinements to the strategy of "horizontal escalation," which governs decisions on where the United States might retaliate for an attack with conventional weapons.

John Ellison, an engineer who heads the research center seeking to revive skills for mobilizing manpower and the economy in the event of war, laments the disappearance of such skills in what he considers to have been "30 years of inattention." His center has put students to work looking at conscription, industrial wartime production and prospects for agricultural output.

Those officers, he says, "can be the arms and legs to do significant research and be educated in the process."